

Message Text

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17
ACTION EA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7276
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
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CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 2639

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SCUL, PINR, APER, LA
SUBJECT: LPDR CUTS BACK ON RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES BUT STAGES
TRADITIONAL FUN FESTIVALS

REF VIENTIANE 2598

1. LPDR HAS ELIMINATED OFFICIAL OBSERVANCE OF MOST HOLIDAYS
CELEBRATED PREVIOUSLY UNDER ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENTS, PARTICULARLY
RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS. SINCE LAO NEW YEAR MID-APRIL AND INTERNATIONAL
LABOR DAY MAY 1, LPDR HAS NOT GIVEN CIVIL SERVANTS A DAY OFF ON
HOLIDAYS SUCH AS ANNIVERSARY OF BIRTH, ENLIGHTENMENT AND DEATH
OF BUDDHA; ROCKET FESTIVAL; BEGINNING AND END OF BUDDHIST
LENT; RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER; AND FOUR
RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS AT TIME OF CURRENT THAT LUANG FESTIVAL.

2. LPDR DOES, HOWEVER, PLAN OFFICIAL OBSERVANCE OF HOLIDAYS FOR
DECEMBER 2 AND 3 TO MARK ANNIVERSARY OF ITS ESTABLISHMENT.
LAO OFFICIALS SAY THAT LAO NEW YEAR, INTERNATIONAL LABOR DAY,
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AND INTERNATIONAL NEW YEAR WILL ALSO REMAIN OFFICIAL HOLIDAYS.

3. SOME LAO EXPRESSED DISAPPOINTMENT THAT LPDR DID NOT OFFICIALLY OBSERVE ROCKET FESTIVAL IN MAY, TRADITIONALLY BAWDY CEREMONY DESIGNED TO INVOKE RAINS AT END OF HOT SEASON. SOME BLAMED DEARTH OF RAIN EARLY IN SEASON ON GOVERNMENT FAILURE TO STAGE CUSTOMARY RITES. THERE WERE REPORTEDLY SOME CELEBRATIONS IN VILLAGES BUT NO MAJOR FESTIVAL IN VIENTIANE AS IN PREVIOUS YEARS. GOVERNMENT ALSO DID NOT GIVE ITS EMPLOYEES DAY OFF FOR TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST HOLIDAYS ALTHOUGH IT DID ALLOW THEM IN SOME INSTANCES TO REPORT FOR WORK AN HOUR LATE AFTER DONATING FOOD TO MONKS, ETC.

4. PERHAPS STUNG BY CRITICISM FOR HAVING SKIPPED ROCKET FESTIVAL, LPDR IN OCTOBER ORGANIZED ANNUAL BOAT RACES IN VIENTIANE WHICH TRADITIONALLY TAKE PLACE AT TIME OF HIGH WATER IN MEKONG. LARGE CROWD, WHICH LPDR MEDIA ESTIMATED AT OVER 100,000, GATHERED TO WATCH RACES. IT WAS FIRST TIME SINCE LAO NEW YEAR IN APRIL THAT LPDR ALLOWED PEOPLE TO HAVE A LITTLE FUN INSTEAD OF EXHORTING THEM TO WORK FOR BENEFIT OF "SOCIALIST" (I.E., COMMUNIST) HOMELAND.

5. LPDR IS AGAIN PROVIDING BREAD AND CIRCUSES DURING PRESENT THAT LUANG FESTIVAL INCLUDING DANCERS, SINGERS, ACROBATS, SOME CHEAP GOODS, AND SPORTS SUCH AS HORSE RACING, FIELD HOCKEY, SOCCER, VOLLEYBALL, AND RATTAN BALL. IT HAS, HOWEVER, BANNED GAMBLING AND DRUNKENNESS WHICH WERE USUAL WAYS LAO LET THEIR HAIR DOWN DURING THAT LUANG IN PAST. MOREOVER, BECAUSE OF ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES, LAO HAVE LESS MONEY TO SPEND ON NON-ESSENTIALS, AND MOST SEEM TO FEEL THAT LUANG IS JUST NOT SO MUCH FUN THIS YEAR AS IT WAS IN PAST.

6. ALSO NOTEWORTHY THAT TWO LPDR VICE PREMIERS, MINISTER OF FINANCE NOUHAK PHOUMSAVAN AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION, SPORTS, AND RELIGION PHOUMI VONVICHIT, AND SUPREME PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY VICE CHAIRMAN KHAMSOUK KEOLA PARTICIPATED IN CEREMONY TO PROVIDE FOOD TO MONKS DURING THAT LUANG FAIR. UNLIKE PHOUMI, WHO OFTEN ATTENDS RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS AS RESPONSIBLE MINISTER, PRESENCE OF NOUHAK IS UNUSUAL. ON OTHER HAND, FRENCH REPORT THAT PREMIER KAYSONE, WHO ALMOST NEVER APPEARS IN PUBLIC, IS CURRENTLY HOLED UP IN PARTY HEADQUARTERS AT KILOMETER SIX, FORMER USAID
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RESIDENCE AREA, POSSIBLY AFRAID OF ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS
IF HE SHOULD VENTURE OUT.
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